
A Taxonomy for the Composition of Memorandum Subject Lines: Facilitating Writer Choice in Managerial Contexts

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Research on advance organizers demonstrates the importance of memorandum subject lines for reader comprehension and, by implication, reinforces the notion that a relationship exists between writer choice and communication context. Yet, existing pedagogy presents memorandum subject lines with no regard for context. This article introduces a taxonomy for subject-line composition that takes context into account by classifying memorandum subject lines as either neutral or directed. Analysis of 483 memorandum subject lines led to the development of this taxonomy. Findings from this analysis, as well as findings from several follow-up exercises which tested the usefulness of the taxonomy, indicate that writers compose memorandum subject lines much as pedagogical materials recommend and that these subject lines are usually neutral. However, when given alternatives, writers actually prefer directed subject lines for some situations. While the study focuses on subject lines in managerial memorandums, the proposed taxonomy and findings on writer choice may be more broadly applied and have important implications for pedagogy and research on managerial writing.

“Everyone agrees that a writer’s sense of purpose usually directs choices about what to say and where and how to say it,” writes Knoblauch (153).¹ Indeed, a number of composition scholars believe that writers are usually aware of what might be called contextual factors. After studying the perceptions of administrators and caseworkers in a county social-service agency, Odell and Goswami conclude that “writers in nonacademic settings are sensitive to rhetorical context” (220), including the characteristics of their audiences; the status of their subjects; and their own personal roles, *ethos*, and feelings.

Associated with the belief that writers are mindful of rhetorical context is the growing recognition of the need to understand how contextual factors affect writer choice. We have little information, Odell and Goswami state, “about the types of stylistic and substan-

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tive choices writers make or the reasons that govern a writer's choosing one alternative in preference to another" (202). Studies exploring writers' contextual choices—including the studies by Herrington; Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller; Huckin, Curtin, and Graham; and Brown and Herndl—dramatically illustrate the need to know more about what's really going on out there and suggest the inadequacy of generally accepted writing rules, formulas, and models for managerial writing that ignore context. Evidence strongly suggests that writing pedagogy benefits as research increasingly accounts for the role of contextual factors.

This study continues the line of research exploring writers' sensitivity to context by examining writers' choices for memorandum subject lines for two managerial situations. More specifically, the study examines the relationship between memorandum subject lines and the rhetorical situations for which they were written—a relationship, it will be shown, that is not accounted for in current pedagogy nor understood by managerial writers. Analysis of 483 memorandum subject lines led to the development of a taxonomy for subject-line composition. Taking context into account, this taxonomy classifies memorandum subject lines as either neutral or directed. The usefulness of the taxonomy was subsequently tested in several follow-up exercises. Findings from the analysis and the exercises indicate that writers compose memorandum subject lines much as pedagogical materials recommend and that these subject lines are usually neutral; however, when presented with a variety of alternatives for given contexts, writers actually prefer directed subject lines—that is, subject lines reflecting their purposes. While the study focuses on subject lines in managerial memorandums, the proposed taxonomy and findings on writer choice may be more broadly applied and have important implications for pedagogy and research on managerial writing.

Relationship of Memorandum Subject Lines to Communication Context

Subject lines are the thematic titles or topic statements of memorandums. The value of memorandum subject lines in writer/reader communication is often assumed: Business professionals regularly write and read memorandum subject lines, and communication specialists note in business-communication textbooks the importance of these subject lines. Memorandum subject lines are said to eliminate the need for detailed opening paragraphs, to introduce content, and to facilitate handling of this content; hence, these subject lines save time for the writer, the reader, and the staff members who file and retrieve documents (Sigband and Bell 295; Himstreet and Baty 249). Smeltzer and Waltman suggest that subject lines are also useful buffers for bad news, although these authors do not elaborate. Additionally, some communication specialists recognize subject lines as persuasive devices: Sweetnam calls a subject line an "advertising

piece” which is one of the writer’s “most underused power hooks” (84). A felicitous subject line, like a one-line abstract, tells the reader what the memorandum covers, indicates how the memorandum should be treated, and may prompt the reader to do something with the memorandum—to read, skim, consider, transfer, neglect, file, or destroy it. In other words, the memorandum subject line can help the reader answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” The fact that readers may use the subject line to determine the value of a memorandum suggests that, either by default or by design, the subject line may contribute to the success or failure of the memorandum. Research on advance organizers confirms this suggestion.

Significance of Memorandum Subject Lines as Advance Organizers

While there appears to be no research testing the necessity or effectiveness of subject lines *per se*, studies of advance organizers certainly apply. David Ausubel introduced the notion of advance organizers when he tested the hypothesis that “the learning and retention of unfamiliar but meaningful verbal material can be facilitated by the advanced introduction of relevant subsuming concepts (organizers)” (267). Ausubel asked participants in several experiments to study a 2,500-word passage about an unfamiliar topic—the metallurgical properties of steel. Prior to contact with the passage, some participants read an introduction or advance organizer, containing “substantive background material of a conceptual nature presented at a much higher level of generality, abstraction, and inclusiveness than [the passage on] the steel . . . itself” (271). Other participants read a traditional historical introduction. Ausubel’s results showed that the participants who were provided with the advance organizer remembered more of the passage than the participants who were provided with the traditional historical introduction. Based on these results, Ausubel concluded that “the greater use of appropriate (substantive rather than historical) advance organizers in the teaching of meaningful verbal material can lead to more effective retention” (271).

Other researchers have broadened the definition of advance organizers to include simple summaries, topic statements, titles, or brief verbal or visual introductions which these researchers tested in a variety of experiments. Findings from these experiments are dramatic, especially the findings of Dooling and Lachman, who explored the impact of titles on reader comprehension and recall. Dooling and Lachman asked two groups to read a vague metaphorical passage. One of the groups read a titled passage; the other group read an untitled passage. Afterward, the individuals in both groups each completed a questionnaire requiring them to recall the passage. Through the rating of these questionnaires, Dooling and Lachman determined that 116 of the 180 individuals who read the titled passage understood the specific thematic content of the passage,

whereas only *four* of the 180 individuals who read the untitled passage were similarly successful. Dooling and Lachman concluded that thematic titles serve as interpretive and mnemonic devices for the comprehension of prose passages.

Subsequent research has reinforced Dooling and Lachman's findings. Through a series of experiments, Bransford and Johnson demonstrated that individuals who were informed of the topic of a passage prior to hearing the passage had a higher comprehension level than individuals who were not thus informed. Individuals without this advance notification of topics reported searching actively for the meaning of the passage as they read. Along similar lines, Kalt and Barrett tested the effectiveness of various advance organizers in technical manuals. Working with an experimental group of 40 engineers, they found that initial summaries facilitated learning and enhanced the effectiveness of technical manuals as reference tools. These studies strongly suggest that information is more comprehensible, memorable, and functional when advance organizers such as titles, topic statements, or subject lines are provided.²

By demonstrating the value of advance organizers, Ausubel, Dooling and Lachman, Bransford and Johnson, and others suggest a relationship between memorandum subject lines and rhetorical context: Readers need advance organizers, such as subject lines, to decipher messages efficiently. This relationship poses important questions for current business-writing pedagogy: Do instructional materials account for the contextual significance of memorandum subject lines? Do managerial writers take context into consideration when they compose memorandum subject lines? The following sections present findings indicating that these questions may be answered with a simple *no*—an answer that prompted the proposed taxonomy.

Pedagogical Directives for Subject-Line Composition

Current pedagogical discussions provide general directives for subject-line composition. Typically, writers are instructed to compose clear, complete, and concise subject lines; however, explanations of these directives, if offered at all, seldom exceed one page each and often only consist of a sentence or two. Taken together, pedagogical directives for clarity and completeness suggest that subject lines should

2. In 1979, Barnes and Clawson took issue with these research findings. They argued that "The efficacy of advance organizers has not been established." Further, they asserted that "Advance organizers, as presently constructed, generally do not facilitate learning" (651). However, in the same year, Mayer critiqued Barnes and Clawson's analysis and reasserted the majority opinion that advance organizers contribute positively to the learning process.

- answer the questions “when, where, why, what, and how whenever appropriate” (Varner 70).
- include verbs indicating the memorandum’s conclusions or recommendations (Murphy and Hildebrandt 448).
- suggest the memorandum’s content via the first word (Sweetnam 79).
- present information positively, changing a negative statement such as “Long Overdue Raise” to “Raise for Tony Andrino” (Roman and Raphaelson 39).

Often, examples of subject lines are offered in lieu of explanations: “Car Insurance” is said to be more complete as “Change in Company Policy on Rental Car Insurance” (Kohut and Baxter 73); “Sales” is said to be more specific as “Sales Data of District 5 for June 3, 19XX” (Varner 70). Munter illustrates how a subject line can be either too broad—as with “Announcement”—or too specific—as with “Announcement about the meeting at 2:00 P.M. on Friday, October 15, to discuss three items” (157). These pedagogical directives for clarity and completeness do not explain when, where, and why particular examples might be effective.

Pedagogical directives for conciseness are more diverse. Some directives recommend that subject lines not exceed one line (Bowman and Branchaw 145). Munter explains that a subject line is not a sentence or a paragraph, but a phrase, and she provides the following illustration:

Incorrect: Subject: We will be holding a meeting next Friday at 2:00 P.M. in the conference room

Correct: Subject: October 15 meeting agenda

(157)

In contrast to these directives, Roman and Raphaelson recommend that writers not worry about the length of memorandum subject lines but simply use as many words as needed (39).

In summary, pedagogical directives recommend that memorandum subject lines be clear, complete, and concise—and textbooks frequently provide examples illustrating these characteristics. However, some researchers believe that pedagogical directives of this kind do not sufficiently address the complexities confronting writers in the real world. For example, Hagge contends that such directives “sound sensible at first . . . but . . . convey little actual content” (49). He calls them “vague apothegms” (50). Supporting this view, field studies of managerial documents indicate that pedagogical directives of this kind are of limited practical use to writers attempting to compose specific documents for specific readers in specific situations, because these directives do not provide writers with conceptual frameworks for composing effectively within a variety of contexts (Brown and Herndl; Rogers).

A Taxonomy for Contextual Subject-Line Composition

The proposed taxonomy is a tool designed to help managerial writers compose memorandum subject lines keenly crafted to meet such writers' particular needs in various situations. After the taxonomy is described, I will discuss the development of the taxonomy and the follow-up exercises that demonstrate the usefulness of the taxonomy.

Description of the Taxonomy

The taxonomy classifies memorandum subject lines as either *neutral* or *directed*. A neutral subject line introduces the memorandum's topic without revealing the writer's intention or specific purpose for writing. Neutral subject lines may be broad labels, such as "Batton's MBA Studies Policy" or "I & R Department." These neutral subject lines also may be somewhat more informative phrases which include verbals or modifiers that narrow, specify, or otherwise qualify topics in some way, such as "Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy" or "Current Management of I & R Department at South Telco." Borrowing from pedagogy on headings (Lesikar and Lyons; Bovee and Thill), we might subclassify neutral subject lines into two categories: neutral-topical subject lines (neutral broad labels) or neutral-talking subject lines (neutral qualified phrases). Whether in either category, a neutral subject line reveals little or nothing about the writer's objective or reason for writing.

By contrast, a directed subject line reveals the writer's intention. For example, the subject line "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy" suggests that the writer intends to argue in favor of a specific policy, and the subject line "Changes to Be Implemented in the I & R Department" suggests that the writer intends particular actions to be taken. Examples of neutral and directed subject lines are listed below:

- Neutral-Topical Subject Lines (broad labels)
 - "Fresh Catch Co. Donations"
 - "Leave of Absence"
 - "Sportech's Fitness Events"
- Neutral-Talking Subject Lines (qualified phrases)
 - "Fresh Catch Co. Donations For Next Year"
 - "Leave of Absence to Pursue MBA Degree"
 - "Participation in Sportech's Fitness Events in August"
- Directed Subject Lines (phrases revealing writer intention)
 - "Fresh Catch Co. Should Donate Seafood to Arbor Haven"
 - "Leave of Absence Needed"
 - "Benefits of Participating in Sportech's Fitness Events"

Analysis of the subject lines used for this study suggests, as will be shown, that directed subject lines do not possess particular linguistic characteristics that consistently distinguish them from neutral-

talking subject lines. While directed subject lines may have a greater incidence of verbs, both directed and neutral-talking subject lines tend to be longer and to include significantly more verbals, modifiers, and internal phrases than neutral-topical subject lines—which tend to consist of unadorned, often proper, nouns. This observation suggests that a taxonomy for subject-line composition should focus writer attention not on the linguistic characteristics of memorandum subject lines, as do many pedagogical directives, but rather on the *function* of memorandum subject lines in various contexts. The distinction between directed and neutral-talking subject lines seems to rest in the contextual meanings of individual words rather than in these subject lines' linguistic arrangement. The completeness and detail found in both directed and neutral-talking subject lines recommend these types of subject lines for managerial use; however, in situations calling for assertion—and such situations are frequent in business—managers may find directed subject lines the more appropriate of the two.

Before leaving the discussion of the taxonomy, it is also useful to note that we might assign any number of descriptive terms to memorandum subject lines that reveal the writer's intention—terms such as *assertive subject lines*, *thesis subject lines*, *instructive subject lines*, or the like. However, the term *directed* seems well-suited to discussions of managerial writing, which are, after all, discussions about directing people and their activities. Work concerning managers in company training programs and students in management-communication courses confirms the appropriateness of the term *directed*: In my experience, managers and MBA students readily understand and adopt this term. All the same, the significant idea is the notion of direction itself rather than what we decide to term subject lines that reveal the writer's objective.

Exercises

The conclusion that the proposed taxonomy increases writer awareness of the relationship between memorandum subject lines and communication context followed from a series of exercises. Central to this study, exercise 1 involved collecting memorandum subject lines written for two managerial situations, to be described later in this article, and allowed the researcher

1. to examine the features of memorandum subject lines typically written.
2. to identify some of the contextual factors writers overlook when composing these subject lines.
3. to design a taxonomy to enhance subject-line composition.

Follow-up exercises 2, 3, and 4 were designed, not as experiments from which to derive quantitative results, but rather as preliminary explorations of composition tools that might be used to increase writer sensitivity to context. Exercise 2 investigated the memoran-

dum subject lines writers choose when presented with neutral-topical, neutral-talking, and directed alternatives. Exercises 3 and 4 tested the usefulness of the proposed taxonomy for subject-line composition. The qualified findings that emerge from these follow-up exercises suggest a logic, I believe, that would not have surfaced so readily in a study of a different kind.

Exercise 1: Characteristics of Memorandum Subject Lines Writers Originated

The memorandum subject lines collected for analysis were composed by 74 managers in a Fortune 500 company and 409 MBA students, 77% of whom possessed work experience in business. Writing skill was not a criterion for participation; rather, the managers were beginning a communication-training seminar, and the students were new entrants into the MBA program at The University of Michigan. To evaluate their managerial-writing skills, these individuals were given 50 minutes each to compose a persuasive memorandum in response to one of two short cases. Two comparable cases were used, each involving a specific managerial situation with which the respondents could identify readily. The Batton Industries Case asked writers to oppose a superior's intention to disallow release time for MBA studies. (See Appendix A.) The South Telco Case asked writers to outline expectations for a lower-level employee who was failing in his job. (See Appendix B.)

To induce the composition of subject lines, the respondents were asked to write their memorandums on stationery with the company logo and with the following heading:

To:
From:
Date:
Subject:

Prompted by the lead "Subject," only 24 of the 507 respondents did not write subject lines for their persuasive memorandums; therefore, 483 subject lines were collected. Analysis revealed no discernible differences between the memorandum subject lines written by the managers and those written by the MBA students.

Especially striking about the resulting 483 memorandum subject lines is their general compliance with pedagogical directives. The majority of these subject lines are clear and complete and include meaningful proper nouns and modifiers, especially adjectives and internal phrases. Sixty-one percent include at least one internal phrase, as in "Leave of Absence *for the MBA Degree*," and 15% include more than one internal phrase, as in "Company Policy *Regarding Leave of Absence for MBA Study*." The fact that over half of these memorandum subject lines contain internal phrases suggests that writers understand the need for sufficient detail.

These memorandum subject lines also comply to some extent with pedagogical directives for verb use and frontloading. About 25% contain verbs or verbals, as in “Reasons for *Granting* Leaves of Absence to Employees *Working* on MBA Degrees” and “Leave of Absence to *Pursue* MBA Degree.” In about 11% of these subject lines containing verbs or verbals, the verbs or verbals are placed first, or frontloaded, as in “*Maintaining* Educational Leave Policy for MBAs at Batton Industries.” In general, the 483 Batton and Telco subject lines are frontloaded with meaningful modifiers, nouns, or verbs.

The number of subject lines which present information negatively rather than positively is more difficult to determine, since the Batton and Telco cases are hypothetical, and we can only conjecture how readers of the memorandums might interpret various words and phrases. Readers might find the following subject lines negative because of certain key words:

- “Proposal to *Eliminate* Eight Month Leave of Absence Allowed for Pursuit of MBA Degree”
- “*Threat of Discontinuation* of MBA Studies Program”
- “I & R *Backlog*”
- “*Poor* Performance of Installation and Repair”

Subject lines with negative words of this type comprise only about 7% of the total. The significance of this percentage is further reduced when one considers that, given the writers’ objectives for the Batton and Telco cases, a memorandum subject line with such negative words might be appropriate. For example, for the Telco Case, the subject line “*Poor* Performance of Installation and Repair” seems to identify the crux of the problem which the writer must address.

Furthermore, the Batton and Telco subject lines are usually concise, seldom exceeding one line. The average subject-line length is 5 words. The longest subject line consists of 19 words, which is clearly an exception. Only 10% of the subject lines have 10 or more words, and only 2% have 12 or more words. All of the memorandum subject lines collected adhere to Munter’s directive that a subject line should be a phrase rather than a sentence or a paragraph.

These findings from exercise 1 suggest that managers and MBA students compose memorandum subject lines much as pedagogical directives recommend: The Batton and Telco subject lines are usually concise phrases averaging five words in length, with key words frequently placed first; almost all include proper nouns, modifiers, and internal phrases; and about one-fourth include verbs or verbals that provide clarity and completeness. Moreover, in all but a few exceptional instances, these subject lines deal with the subjects of the memorandum texts they precede.

Nevertheless, analysis suggests that writers do not realize the connection between memorandum subject lines and communication context. Only 8% of the Batton and Telco respondents wrote subject lines that may be classified as directed, even though these respond-

ents were asked to compose memorandums asserting a particular viewpoint. Directed subject lines are germane to both the Batton and Telco cases: In the Batton Case, the writer is asked by a superior to defend a benefit program slated for discontinuation; in the Telco Case, the writer is to alert an employee to the urgent need to change the employee's present practices. Both cases involve writers in matters of personal consequence: In the Batton Case, the writer is participating in the threatened benefit program; and in the Telco Case, the writer has hired and is responsible for the delinquent employee. Both cases invite directness of approach, yet few of the respondents composed directed subject lines. The discussion of representative subject lines, which follows, illustrates this point.

Subject-line analysis allowed me and two research assistants to distinguish nine basic types of Batton subject lines and to compose representative subject lines characterizing each of these types. The representative subject lines consist of often-used descriptive nouns, verbs, or modifiers. Since such descriptive words are frontloaded in the majority of the Batton subject lines, such words are also frontloaded in the representative subject lines. References to "Batton" or the "MBA Policy" were standardized as "Batton's MBA Studies Policy." The resulting representative subject lines typify the majority of the Batton subject lines collected. After these representative subject lines were composed, I and three other researchers independently classified these subject lines as neutral-topical, neutral-talking, or directed. Table 1 shows how each representative subject line was classified and the relative popularity of each of these subject lines. As shown in column one, the respondents to the Batton Case in exercise 1 composed largely neutral-topical subject lines: 67% of these respondents composed neutral-topical subject lines, 28% composed neutral-talking subject lines, and only 3% composed directed subject lines. These respondents originated the subject lines for their memorandums without aid. The fact that so many of the respondents to the Batton Case in exercise 1 composed neutral subject lines in a situation where they were asked to assert a particular point of view suggests a lack of contextual awareness on the writers' part.³ Follow-up exercises support this hypothesis.

3. It is also noteworthy that 16% of the Batton memorandum subject lines written for exercise 1 may be interpreted as supporting President Wuest's decision to discontinue Batton's MBA studies policy; that is, these subject lines seem to support viewpoints *opposite* to the writers' goals. For example, in contrast to the memorandum subject lines which speak of "continuing" the studies policy, subject lines such as "*Change* in Batton's MBA Studies Policy" may suggest to some readers that the writer supports the change. Even more so, subject lines including words such as "abolishment," "cancellation," "discontinuation," and "termination" (as represented by "Elimination of Batton's MBA Studies Policy") seem to negate rather than defend the policy. Subject lines such as "Batton's New MBA Studies Policy" read as if the discontinuation of the policy is a *fait accompli*.

TABLE 1

CLASSIFIED REPRESENTATIVE BATTON
SUBJECT LINES AND WRITERS' RESPONSES
TO EXERCISES 1, 2, & 3

	<i>Exercise 1</i>	<i>Exercise 2</i>	<i>Exercise 3</i>
	<i>% Selected</i>	<i>% Selected</i>	<i>% Selected w/ Taxonomy</i>
<u>Neutral-Topical</u>			
Batton's MBA Studies Policy	67	15	0
<u>Neutral-Talking</u>			
Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy	11	12	0
Elimination of Batton's MBA Studies Policy	6	3	0
Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy	5	13	4
Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy	4	4	0
Batton's New MBA Studies Policy	1	1	0
Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy **	1	32	12
Total % Neutral-Talking	28	65	16
<u>Directed</u>			
Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA			
Studies Policy	3	14	52
Arguments for Continuing and Upgrading			
Batton's MBA Studies Policy	***	6	32
Total % Directed	3	20	84

- * Representative subject lines were not composed for the slightly less than two percent of the Batton subject lines that were anomalous.
- ** Four researchers agreed on the representative subject-line classification in Table 1, with one exception. Two researchers classified "Value of . . ." as directed rather than neutral-talking. Without a consensus, I conservatively placed this representative subject line in the neutral-talking category since a directed subject line must clearly communicate the writer's opinion or intention.
- *** This representative subject line characterizes less than one percent of the Batton subject lines collected.

Exercise 2: Types of Memorandum Subject Lines Writers Selected When Given Alternatives

Exercise 2 was designed to determine what types of memorandum subject lines writers would select if these writers were presented with a variety of neutral-topical, neutral-talking, and directed subject-line alternatives. Given a variety of neutral and directed subject lines from which to choose, would writers still prefer neutral-topical subject lines? To address this question, 20 medical managers and 58 MBA students were asked to read the Batton Case, to each select a subject line for the Batton memorandum from a random listing of the representative subject lines, and to write explanations of their choices. The representative subject lines are listed below:

- Batton's New MBA Studies Policy
- Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Arguments for Continuing and Upgrading Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Elimination of Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy

The 78 respondents were given no other directions, nor were they introduced to the subject-line taxonomy.

As illustrated in Table 1, column two, the results of this exercise show a preference for neutral-talking subject lines among well over half of the respondents. The most popular subject line was "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy." Thirty-two percent of the respondents preferred this neutral-talking representative subject line because of the stress on *value*, which, as one respondent put it, "is perhaps the best way to get the positive aspects across to your boss." A few of the respondents selected this subject line because they said it most clearly expressed the intent of their memorandums without antagonizing readers.

Reasons why 15% of the respondents in exercise 2 preferred the neutral-topical representative subject line, "Batton's MBA Studies Policy," largely centered around this subject line's neutrality. As one respondent wrote, "I chose this subject line because it will not allow the reader to pre-judge the contents of the memo, because it is neutral." Similarly, another respondent stated, "I do not want to put the President on the defensive by mentioning . . . the fact that I am going to argue against his decision in this memo." By contrast, one respondent justified this choice by explaining that arguments should be presented in the body of the memorandum, not in the subject line.

Fourteen percent of the respondents in exercise 2 selected the directed representative subject line, "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy." As one respondent wrote, "[This] subject line states [the memorandum's] purpose and provides enough motiva-

tion for the reader to want to read it in a non-combative way.”

Those 13% of the respondents who selected the neutral-talking representative subject line, “Proposed Change in Batton’s MBA Studies Policy,” liked the word *change* because, they said, this word identified the main concern of the memorandum. One respondent called *change* a “key word.”

The remaining 26% of the respondents in exercise 2 selected various other neutral-talking or directed representative subject lines.

The results of exercise 2 suggest that writers prefer neutral-talking subject lines when they are aware of subject-line alternatives. In this exercise, 65% of the respondents selected neutral-talking subject lines—a dramatic increase over the 28% in exercise 1. Directed subject lines are also more popular when writers are given subject-line alternatives.

Exercise 3: Types of Memorandum Subject Lines Writers Selected Using the Taxonomy

Exercise 3 was designed to determine what types of memorandum subject lines writers would select if these writers were first introduced to the subject-line taxonomy. Would knowledge of the taxonomy increase writer preference for directed subject lines for the Batton Case? To address this question, 25 MBA students were introduced to the subject-line taxonomy, and then, like the respondents in exercise 2, each student was asked to read the Batton Case, to select a subject line for the Batton memorandum from the random listing of representative subject lines, and to explain why the particular subject line was chosen. It is important to note that the introduction of the subject-line taxonomy for exercise 3 included a discussion of memorandums written for a variety of specific managerial contexts, some contexts best served by neutral subject lines and other contexts by directed subject lines. Also, the introduction to the taxonomy included no mention of the Batton Case, which the respondents were shortly thereafter asked to consider.

The results of exercise 3 are only suggestive, given the small number of respondents; yet these results are impressive. Eighty-four percent of the respondents selected directed representative subject lines, as shown in Table 1, column three. The most popular subject line, “Reasons for Continuing Batton’s MBA Studies Policy,” was selected by 52% of the respondents—all of whom selected this subject line because, as one respondent explained, this subject line “tells the reader exactly what they will find in this memo.” Over half of the respondents also found “Reasons for Continuing Batton’s MBA Studies Policy” potentially less offensive to readers than “Arguments for Continuing and Upgrading Batton’s MBA Studies Policy.” As one respondent explained, “the subject line [‘Reasons for Continuing Batton’s MBA Studies Policy’] communicates what I intend to state in the memo without attacking the president’s or Ms. McFee’s position.” By contrast, less than one-third of the respondents in exer-

cise 2 who selected this subject line registered similar concerns over offending potential readers.

Reasons why 32% of the respondents preferred the directed representative subject line, "Arguments for Continuing and Upgrading Batton's MBA Studies Policy," centered around the words *arguments* and *upgrading*. All the respondents who selected this subject line explained that, since they would present arguments in the memorandum, it was appropriate to introduce that fact in the subject line. Almost two-thirds of the respondents who selected this subject line also liked the word *upgrading* because use of this word acknowledged a need for change and therefore identified with the readers' viewpoints. "Upgrading implies I have understood Wuest's concerns and have found ways to improve or cure these problems," wrote one respondent. Again, it may be of interest that, by contrast, none of the respondents in exercise 2 who selected this subject line identified with their readers in this way.

Those 12% of the respondents in exercise 3 who selected the neutral-talking representative subject line, "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy," liked this subject line's positive stress on value. "This subject line buffers the plea to keep the policy," one of these respondents explained. This respondent further explained that this subject line "buffers [the plea] by looking at the value for the company. This 'value' term would catch corporate interest." Along the same lines, another respondent wrote, "The tone [of this subject line] is soft enough yet direct enough to promote reader interest." Many of the respondents in exercise 2 who selected this subject line also noted its positive tone as a reason for their choice; however, far fewer of these earlier respondents noted this subject line's interest-promoting potential.

One respondent in exercise 3 selected the neutral-talking representative subject line, "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy." Similar to how the respondents in exercise 2 explained their preferences for the neutral-topical subject line—"Batton's MBA Studies Policy"—by focusing on this subject line's neutrality, this respondent in exercise 3 explained his preference for the neutral-talking subject line, "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy," as follows:

I would want to start out on neutral ground. If my [subject line] indicates an opposing position, the reader will immediately become defensive. However, I can slowly convince him/her of the value of the MBA policy by a neutral [subject line]. "Proposed Change" is neutral, but also implies the possibility of keeping the MBA program intact.

Similarly, one respondent in exercise 2 who selected the subject line "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy" did so because this subject line avoided the negativism found in some of the other representative subject lines which, he explained, "could set a reader off immediately."

The results of exercise 3 indicate that, when introduced to subject-line alternatives and the subject-line taxonomy, writers prefer directed subject lines in situations calling for assertion. Moreover, the respondents' explanations suggest that knowledge of the taxonomy heightens writer sensitivity to the contextual demands of varying situations—particularly sensitivity toward the intended readers.

Exercise 4: Types of Memorandum Subject Lines Writers Originated When Previously Introduced to the Taxonomy

The results of exercise 3 indicate that, shortly after writers are introduced to the subject-line taxonomy, these writers tend to prefer memorandum subject lines revealing these writers' intentions in contexts calling for assertion. Yet, one wonders if the same writers will remember and employ the taxonomy in the future: Is the taxonomy memorable and transferable? Will the taxonomy facilitate writer decision making in a variety of contexts, or will the taxonomy be forgotten or dismissed—like some of the pedagogical directives in our textbooks—when writers face complex contextual expectations and constraints? Exercise 4 begins to address these questions.

In exercise 4—much like in exercise 1—the respondents were given 50 minutes to compose persuasive memorandums in response to a short case. The Empire Car Case asked writers to oppose their boss's proposal to base their promotions on the number of CarStyle Programs these writers sold. (See Appendix C.) As with the Batton and Telco cases, the respondents were asked to write on stationery with the traditional memorandum heading: "To," "From," "Date," and, most importantly, "Subject." Prompted by this heading, only one of the 25 respondents did not compose a subject line; therefore, 24 memorandum subject lines were collected.

Although exercises 1 and 4 were comparable, the respondents in each differed in one important respect: The respondents in exercise 1 had not been previously introduced to the taxonomy, while the respondents in exercise 4 had been so introduced. Actually, the respondents in exercise 4 were the same respondents who had participated in exercise 3 over two months earlier and had learned about the taxonomy in conjunction with exercise 3. However, for exercise 4, the taxonomy was not reintroduced, nor was the importance of memorandum subject lines discussed. Rather, the respondents regarded exercise 4 as a timed activity that would be used to evaluate their writing. Under these circumstances, the respondents in exercise 4 composed the 23 memorandum subject lines listed and classified in Table 2.

For exercises 1 and 4, the respondents were asked to compose persuasive memorandums for similar managerial situations. Yet, with prior knowledge of the taxonomy, the respondents in exercise 4 originated far fewer neutral-topical subject lines and far more directed subject lines than the respondents in exercise 1, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 2*

CLASSIFIED EMPIRE CAR CASE SUBJECT LINES

Neutral-Topical

CarStyle Program in the Iowa and Nebraska Regions

CarStyle

CarStyle Program

Selling CarStyle in Iowa & Nebraska

Total % of Neutral-Topical 17%**Neutral-Talking**

Proposed Changes to the CarStyle System Implementation

Reevaluating the Use of "CarStyle" Promotional Tool for District 2,
Field 1CarStyle Program's Problems as They Relate to the Midwestern
District and Possible Alternatives

Determining the Appropriateness of CarStyle for Empire Territories

Total % of Neutral-Talking 17%**Directed**Disadvantages of Implementing the CarStyle Program in the Iowa &
Nebraska Markets

CarStyle Ineffectiveness in Small Communities

Inappropriateness of CarStyle for Iowa/Nebraska Region

CarStyle Not Appropriate for Midwestern District

CarStyle Program Inappropriate for Iowa and Nebraska Dealers

Inappropriateness of "CarStyle" Program for Territory Three
Dealerships

The Inappropriateness of the CarStyle Program for Territory K

CarStyle's Inappropriateness for the Iowa/Nebraska Region

Reasons Why Carstyle is Inappropriate for Small Town Dealerships

CarStyle's Benefits Exceed Field J's Needs

Selling CarStyle Does Not Reflect My Dealer Servicing Ability

Reasons for Opposition to "CarStyle" Program

Reasons CarStyle is Inappropriate for Usage in Region L

Iowa/Nebraska District Should Use an Alternative to CarStyle
Promotional Program

The Best Way to Target Our CarStyle Marketing Efforts

Total % of Directed 63%

- * The same four researchers who classified the Batton representative subject lines also independently classified the Empire Car subject lines. Three agreed on the classifications in Table 2. The fourth placed the seven subject lines that use the words "ineffective" or "inappropriate" without qualification or elaboration (such as "Inappropriateness of CarStyle for Iowa/Nebraska Region") in the neutral-talking category. I went with the majority opinion. The unusual subject line, "The Right Tools for the Right Job," was not classified.

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF SUBJECT LINES COMPOSED
FOR EXERCISES 1 AND 4

	Exercise 1 % Batton	Exercise 4 % Empire Car
Neutral-Topical	67	17
Neutral-Talking	28	17
Directed	3	63

When comparing the results of exercise 1 with the results of exercise 4, it is important to note that exercises 1 and 4 were different from each other in two respects:

- sample size—exercise 1 included 483 subjects; exercise 4 included 24 subjects
- respondent characteristics—the respondents in exercise 1 were managers and MBA students; the respondents in exercise 4 were MBA students only

With these differences in mind, we may draw the guarded conclusion that the taxonomy is memorable, transferable, and—most significantly—seems to encourage writers to consider choices based on context.

Conclusion

Munter acknowledges that the subject line is the most difficult element of a memorandum for the writer to compose, while research on advance organizers demonstrates that subject lines significantly increase reader comprehension and retention (Ausubel; Dooling and Lachman). Concurrently, field studies illustrate a need to replace pedagogical directives with composition tools that heighten writer sensitivity to contextual factors (Brown and Herndl; Rogers). Such tools would prompt writers to shape documents to meet their specific personal and organizational goals. As Knoblauch concludes, “The writer’s own sense of purpose . . . is a crucial reference for measuring effectiveness” (155). The difficulties inherent in composing memorandum subject lines, the proven importance of these subject lines, and the need for pedagogical approaches that increase writer sensitivity to context motivated the study that is the focus of this article.

The collection and analysis of 483 memorandum subject lines composed for two managerial contexts, and a series of follow-up exercises, indicate that—in communication situations calling for assertion—writers compose subject lines much as pedagogical recom-

mends and that these subject lines are usually neutral; however, when exposed to alternatives, writers often select subject lines different from those they would originate. These findings suggest that writers may have difficulty generating subject-line options and may fail to understand the connection between their memorandum subject lines and their reasons for writing. Perhaps writers' tacit assumptions about context—particularly with regard to purpose—do not adequately equip writers to compose documents suited to the complex situations for which they write.

Discovering what writers appear to know and not know about memorandum subject lines prompted the development of a taxonomy for subject-line composition. By classifying memorandum subject lines as either neutral or directed, the taxonomy accentuates the relationship between composing subject lines and considering contextual factors. The follow-up exercises indicate that the taxonomy heightens writer awareness of the relationship between memorandum subject lines and communication context by confronting writers with the notion that their subject lines either reveal the writers' goals or remain neutral. Moreover, after writers are introduced to the taxonomy, they tend to compose directed rather than neutral subject lines in situations calling for assertion—a result that may have special appeal for those training managerial writers.

As a heuristic device, the taxonomy for subject-line composition draws attention to the fact that writing is contextually based. Using the taxonomy in discussions of memorandum subject lines reveals that neutral subject lines are the most appropriate subject lines for some memorandums in some contexts, and directed subject lines are the most appropriate choices in other contexts. As some of the respondents in exercises 2 and 3 suggested, there may be times when writers prefer to buffer their intentions so that arguments may be presented first; moreover, there are times when writers are not promoting a particular opinion or action but are simply relaying information. Neutral-talking subject lines suit these two situations well. Current pedagogy does not invite such considerations.

The pedagogical usefulness of the taxonomy need not be limited to memorandum subject lines, however. For example, I have found the concepts of neutral and directed useful for distinguishing the presentation of ideas in informative and persuasive messages. In my experience, business writers and speakers sometimes intend their messages to persuade, yet these writers and speakers often present their key ideas as neutral points of information rather than directed arguments. To illustrate, one student wanted to persuade his audience to respect the work of the Salvation Army. His initial outline had two major topics:

- “General Information on the Salvation Army”
- “Special Services of the Salvation Army”

As initially stated, both topics were neutral. After being introduced to the taxonomy, this student changed the wording of his major topics to the following directed statements:

- “The Salvation Army is a Reputable Charity”
- “The Salvation Army Contributes to a Stable Economy”

This simple shift from neutral to directed served to focus the student’s thoughts on his objective to persuade his audience.

By associating writer choice and writer intention, the taxonomy becomes instrumental in the composition process, and, in this way, the taxonomy does more than simply prescribe the shape of a fully formed product. In other words, the taxonomy seems to provide a conceptual framework that encourages writers to consider what their writing choices mean in various situations. Consequently, the taxonomy is not bound by time and place; it is transferable. In this respect, the taxonomy may be suggestive of the kinds of tools uniquely suited for training managers whose success depends, to a great extent, on an ability to originate messages that are contextually responsive.

Appendix A: Batton Industries Case

The new president of Batton Industries, James Wuest, is reviewing all company policies regarding employee benefits. He is especially concerned with the company’s policy regarding MBA studies. Batton Industries has a history of supporting employees who wish to earn their MBA degrees by granting them an eight month leave of absence without pay, but with the guarantee of the same job when they return. Wuest suggests that Batton discontinue this practice for the following reasons:

1. Recent studies show there is a national glut of MBAs.
2. The last three people who took advantage of the Batton program returned for only eight months of combined service and then left the company.
3. The company is concerned about the impact on production when key personnel are absent from their jobs for eight months.

Your boss, Jennifer McFee, reported this information to you after she returned from a meeting with President Wuest and other division directors. She supports President Wuest on this policy.

You are just beginning your MBA studies and have some strong concerns about this policy change. You raise the issue that there are some good reasons for continuing the practice. McFee asks you to prepare a memo summarizing your arguments for her to present at the president’s staff meeting next week.

Instructions

Write a persuasive memo to Jennifer in favor of continuing the company policy of granting leaves of absence to employees working on their MBA degrees. Make up details not included in the case that you think are important (e.g. what other companies are doing; what you know of your own job that would be improved with an MBA degree, etc.). There is no one right answer, but you should use concrete examples to make your argument persuasive.

Your writing should be clear and direct as opposed to vague and official sounding. Don't use fancy vocabulary. You have 50 minutes to write. Work for the entire 50 minutes. No time is allowed for recopying. Edit your memo for correctness. Erasures or crossouts will not be held against you.

Appendix B: South Telco Case

You are the Operations Manager for South Telco, an independently-owned telephone company. Founded shortly after the divestiture of AT&T, South Telco is a growing company, which handles all aspects of voice and data communications for medium-sized businesses in the Southeastern United States.

As Operations Manager, you oversee South Telco's Installation and Repair (I&R) Department. I&R is crucial to South Telco's growth and success. Requests for I&R services are high—about 25 orders are processed and sent to I&R each month. These requests for service must be filled in a timely manner if South Telco is to remain competitive.

About four months ago, you hired Jim Jervakis as the I&R supervisor. Jim oversees 12 I&R employees who install and repair all voice and data communication stations serviced by South Telco. From the beginning, Jim has been asked to participate in staff meetings, to submit written progress reports, and to ensure that I&R requests are completed on schedule.

So far, however, Jim's management of I&R has disappointed you. Over the past four months, you have observed the following problems:

1. Jim delegates project duties, but rarely gets involved. I&R employees say that Jim gives assignments, but he doesn't monitor job progress. I&R employees like autonomy, but they also need direction, especially if differences of opinion arise in how a job should be handled.
2. Jim has only attended one of your staff meetings and has never submitted written progress reports.
3. Service order activity is far behind schedule. When you talked with I&R employees you found them working on service orders that should have been completed some time ago.

You spoke informally with Jim about these problems, explaining that his lack of follow-up on projects and inadequate supervision have led to unhappy customers, loss of service, and loss of revenue for South Telco. Jim, unfortunately, continues to miss meetings, ignore reporting procedures, and I&R continues to run behind schedule. You realize you must take formal steps to improve the situation.

Instructions

Write a memo to Jim explaining your expectations for I&R. The purpose of your memo is: 1) to persuade Jim to make the needed changes, and 2) to document the current problems in I&R. Make-up details to support your statements.

Write with clarity and direction; avoid vague and official sounding vocabulary. You have 50 minutes to write; use the entire period. Crossouts will not be held against you.

Appendix C: Empire Car Case

You are a field manager for the Empire Automotive Company of America. As a field manager, you sell company parts, services, and promotional programs to 20 Empire car dealers in Iowa and Nebraska. In addition, you perform market analyses to determine what parts, services, and promotional programs will help your dealers attract customers. Your ability to sell *appropriate* parts, services, and promotional programs has brought you special recognition, especially in 1988 when you were the top salesperson in the Midwestern District. You're convinced you succeed because you meet your dealers' special needs.

Your district manager, Maria Young, recently announced a new promotional program called CarStyle which was developed at Empire Corporate Headquarters. "I'm confident that the CarStyle Program will convince prospective customers that Empire has the perfect car for them!" Maria said, as she distributed the following description:

CarStyle is an innovative computer program designed to introduce prospective customers to Empire car models. Prominently placed in a dealer's showroom, CarStyle has a colorful display that invites a customer to "Find the Car Designed With You in Mind."

The CarStyle display includes a computer screen and keyboard. Using the keyboard, customers respond to questions about lifestyle, self-image and monetary limitations. CarStyle then presents the Empire car models especially suited to the customer's needs.

The CarStyle Program will: 1) generate additional profits by engaging customers who avoid sales personnel, 2) show customers that Empire is a company "in touch with" the computer age, and 3) highlight car models the company wants to sell quickly.

Maria stressed the importance of the CarStyle Program. "Personnel at Empire Corporate Headquarters are convinced dealers will sell more cars if they invest in CarStyle," she said. "You must sell the program to at least 50% of your dealers for the company to profit, and I expect you to try for 75%. Your yearly appraisal and salary increase will be based on your success in selling CarStyle," she concluded.

You believe the CarStyle Program is inappropriate for your dealers and their customers. All but two of your dealerships are located in small towns where the customers are largely farmers and small business owners. Your dealers know their customers personally—they sit with them at high school football games and eat with them in the local cafe. Your dealers know the car and truck models their customers need. Consequently, you are convinced your dealers will see little value in CarStyle, and you believe customers will be offended by the program.

Instructions

Write a memo to your district manager, Maria Young. Persuade her that the CarStyle Program is inappropriate for your dealers. Convince her that: 1) selling CarStyle has no bearing on your ability to service your dealerships and that, 2) the benefits outlined by the corporate office do not apply to your territory. Support your arguments. Create details not provided by the case.

Write with clarity and direction; avoid vague and official sounding vocabulary. Use the back of pages to brainstorm and outline; only front pages will be read by the evaluators. You have 50 minutes. Use the entire period.

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